

## One *Stūpa* and Three *Lha thos* The Monuments of Tashigang

Gerald Kozicz

(Institute for Architecture and Media, TU Graz)

**A**mong the various surnames used among the Buddhist communities—for both male and female individuals—in the Western Himalayas ‘Tashi’ (*bkra shis*), or ‘Good Luck’, is encountered frequently. For villages, the name of Tashigang (*bkra shis sgang*) apparently enjoyed similar popularity; at least three places by that name located in relatively close vicinity are known to me. One is in Kinnaur, south-east of Nako, another is in the Indus Valley in the Tibetan Autonomous Region of the People’s Republic of China, while the third is located north of Ki Monastery in Upper Spiti. It is the latter site that this article focusses on.

Of the three sites listed above, Tashigang near Ki is the smallest and most remotely situated. It is located literally at the end of a small road behind a pass and above a gorge. Only two families live at Tashigang. One can enjoy a tremendous view across the ravine towards the Sakya (*sa skya*) Monastery of Kormik (*gog mig*) and the mountain ranges beyond. Several *stūpas* and a set of three *lha thos* immediately attract the attention of anyone approaching the site. While the *stūpas* and the houses form a small cluster on a slight slope declining towards the south-east. The three *lha thos* claim a position on a cliff above the hamlet and overlook both the settlement and the landscape beyond. The dominant feature that visually links the *lha thos* with the largest—and therefore outstanding—*stūpa* is their three-colour-scheme of White-Red-Blue. While the *stūpa* is decorated with vertical stripes of those colours, the three *lha thos* are painted in different colours, again creating a notion of verticality through colours due to their elongated shapes.



Fig. 1— Tashigang. (Kozicz 2015)

The *stūpa* is the central object around which the site appears to have been built. The monument is characterised by two significant features. First, its architecture conforms to the so-called gateway *stūpa* type. This type was developed upon the model of the Lo tsa va *stūpa* type that had been most popular in the Indus Valley near Shey and Nyarma. This type basically consisted of a broad cubic base upon which the actual *stūpa* was placed.<sup>1</sup> Those *stūpas* were accessible and a chamber was built into the central turret, decorated with murals and covered by a wooden lantern ceiling, this had also been the case at Tashigang, but the passage, which had been built in accordance with the direction of the slope, was at some point walled up on the north-western hillside face. Thereby the gateway *stūpa* was turned into a *stūpa* shrine or chapel. The second significant feature of the *stūpa* is a set of four turrets at the corners of the broad base. These turrets also display the colour scheme noted above, but here the stripes were applied in a horizontal manner emphasising their pedestal-like character. Greyish-blue painted skulls of blue sheep were placed on top of each turret. Unfortunately, the architectural details of the central *stūpa* have faded away over the past centuries. However, the silhouette of the remains allows for the conclusion that the compositional system conformed to the Tibetan system of *stūpa*

<sup>1</sup> For a description of the typology of the Lo tsa va *stūpa* see Howard 1995: 62–64.

architecture as it became a standard from the fourteenth century onwards.



*Fig. 2 — Front with lha thos in the background. (Kozicz 2015)*



*Fig. 3 — Rear façade. (Kozicz 2012)*

Compared to other specimens of gateway *stūpas*, the Tashigang *stūpa* displays a so far new variant. Instead of a simple passage its superstructure consisted of two major lateral walls and two short wall segments flanking each of the openings or, in other words, a chamber with two openings plus porches. Unlike other gateway *stūpas*, where the passage seems to cut through a massive block, the floor plan of the Tashigang *stūpa* rather reminds of a small chapel open to two directions. As the over-all plan was based on a square measuring 4.60 meters across, the passage appeared like a chamber right from the beginning rather than the usual tunnel-like corridor. Since the 'side walls' were of a constant thickness of approx. 75 centimetres throughout their whole length, that chamber was of rectangular shape measuring approx. 1.60 x 3.00 meters. The chamber that was built into the central *stūpa* body above was square in shape and therefore only covered the central portion of the ground floor chamber. When the north-western entrance was closed, the width of the south-eastern opening was reduced too, by adding another short wall section to the right wall. The reason for only adding one wall portion was probably of a structural nature. If the builders had added two portions (i.e. one vertical stripe on each side), the small portions would hardly have provided sufficient weight to ensure the stability of the wooden door frame. It is a widely documented phenomenon in the Western Himalayan region, that new wall portions added to existing walls were never properly structurally connected to earlier masonry, resulting in instability and severe cracks. Building only one larger portion improved the stability of that new masonry, however, this resulted in an off-centric position of the opening that was then furnished with a wooden portal and door. Thereby the once open passage was turned into an actual chapel.

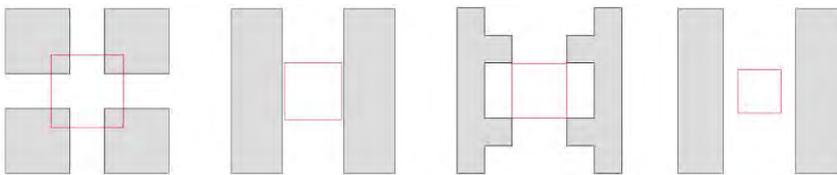


Fig. 4 — Floor plan diagrams of various gateway *stūpas* (f.l.t.r.: Alchi Great Entrance *stūpa*, Alchi Shangrong *stūpa*, Tashigang *stūpa* and Hunder *stūpa*): corridors in relation to chambers (in red). (Drawing Kozicz)

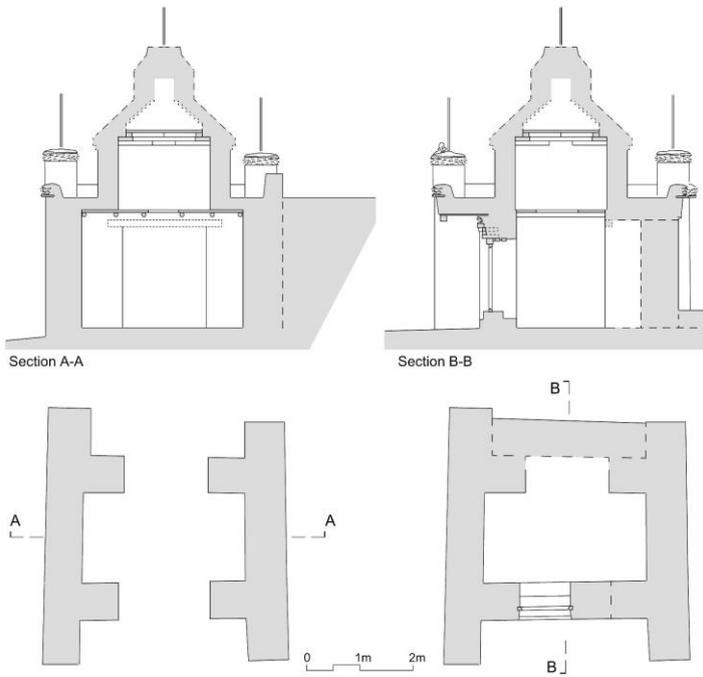


Fig. 5 — Floor plans (original plan left, new plan with blocked passage right) of Tashigang stūpa with related section. (Drawing Kozicz)

When the closure of the hill-facing opening actually happened cannot be determined with confidence. Traditionally, the walls of the corridors of a gateway *stūpas* were not decorated with murals. Only elevated chambers were painted. At Tashigang, however, the ground floor chamber displays deities mainly associated with the Gelugpa (*dge lugs pa*) order, such as Vajrabhairava and Hayagrīva, today. The affiliation to the yellow sect is further sustained by the depiction of several lamas wearing hats of that colour. Opposite the new entrance an altar was installed. Behind the altar, a painted wooden board blocks the view into the niche, which bears witness to the former rear entrance. In turn, this board almost completely disappears behind bundles of white and yellow offering scarves (*kha btags*). In the front, several ritual objects, photographs of Ki Monastery and Buddhist dignitaries of the Gelugpa sect, most prominently of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, as well as a wooden mask of a guardian are hung on strings. All these elements produce a dense atmosphere within this small space. On the small wooden box placed in front of the board, and

under the *kha btags*, new bronzes of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as well as offering bowls are arranged. The box itself serves as a shrine for a fine collection of offering cakes (*gtor ma*). The *gtor mas* are stored together with small twigs of juniper tree (*shug pa*) to secure their purity for the ritual. This chamber reflects the daily rituals practiced and a living Buddhist tradition in general.



Fig. 6 — Murals of the ground floor (left hand side from visitor's perspective). (Kozicz 2012)



Fig. 7 — Altar, *kha btags*, ritual instruments and *gtor ma*. (Kozicz 2012)



*Fig. 8 — Right hand side lateral wall. (Kozicz 2012)*



*Fig. 9 — View towards the ceiling and the upper chamber. (Kozicz 2012)*

The use of bright colours and the dense arrangement of offerings and sacred images all the new interior of the ground floor chamber distracts the attention from the upper chamber. The upper chamber literally dwells in darkness. It not only lacks any sort of opening and natural light, but the actual opening was also reduced in size when the lower compartment was created. The upper chamber was practically removed from the field of perception to anyone entering the chapel. The only element that draws attention is a long spear; the shaft of the spear is placed on the altar and its spearhead is directly pointing towards the central field of a lantern ceiling at close range. Once noted, the ceiling becomes perceivable only slowly while the eyes adapt to the diffuse darkness of the interior. The ceiling has four levels, with the upper levels framing squares, while the lowest creates, as usual, an octagonal figure. The central upper-most square is dedicated to a depiction of Amitāyus, the 'Eternal Life', at the centre of his maṇḍala. All his eight emanations are placed inside the pedals of the maṇḍala and aligned towards Amitāyus. The four intermediate sectors between the maṇḍala circle and the square are occupied by a flower-vase motif. Of all the other eight triangular segments of the ceiling only one segment of the third level has survived with the paintings intact. It shows two figures, probably female, but it is difficult to ascertain. If the assumption concerning their gender is correct, these figures may well represent two of the eight offering goddesses (*mchod pa'i lha mo*) of the maṇḍala. All the surviving figures of the ceiling are depicted in saṃbhogakāya attire, wearing dhoṭī and royal jewellery.



Fig. 10 — View into the upper chamber. (Bertsch 2012)

All four walls reflect the same iconographic pattern. Another depiction of Amitāyus in a seated position is at the centre of each wall. In each of these paintings, Amitāyus is flanked by two other standing Bodhisattvas.<sup>2</sup> All are in saṃbhogakāya attire again, and perform the appropriate mudrā of meditation, holding the vase with ambrosia and a branch of the Aśoka tree in their palms. The four forms of Amitāyus are of different body colours reflecting their directional order: white in the East, yellow in the South, red in the West, and green in the North. The orientation is confirmed by a pair of creatures or mounts (*vāhana*) depicted on the pedestal of each Bodhisattva: lions in the East, horses in the South, peacocks in the West, and garuḍas in the North. Obviously, the white colour usually associated with Vairocana, the central cosmic Buddha of the Vajradhātumaṇḍala, was placed in the East. This form may therefore be identified as Vairocana-Amitāyus. Respectively, the deities in the centres of the southern and the northern walls may be identified as Ratnasambhava-Amitāyus and Amoghasiddhi-Amitāyus.

Gateway *stūpas* with identical iconographic arrangements were also built in several places all over Ladakh. Remarkably, all those *stūpas* have Akṣobhya in the central field of the ceiling but not Amitāyus. Vairocana is commonly placed in central position on the eastern wall. It is a classical five-fold system as fundamentally displayed in the Vajradhātu *maṇḍala* but with Akṣobhya and Vairocana exchanging positions. These monuments are generally dated to the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

At Tashigang, the red colour of the western Bodhisattva deserves a special mention. At first sight the body colour appears whitish, but a close examination reveals that the red colour has faded away and turned into a light pink for an unknown reason. In fact, one would expect the red Amitāyus in the centre (i.e. the centre of the ceiling), and a white form occupying the western wall. Instead, his white form was chosen for the East, while the red manifestation remained in the original western position. Vairocana-Amitāyus therefore replaced Akṣobhya-Amitāyus, and Amitāyus was depicted twice within this mandalic system (i.e. in the centre of the ceiling and again on the Western wall where the Akṣobhya form was deleted).

As already noted by Lokesh Chandra, Amitāyus represents the

---

<sup>2</sup> For examples see Luczanits 1998:156–159 and Devers, Bruneau and Vernier 2014: 130–133.

“apotheosised healing aspect of Amitābha”, the cosmic Buddha of the West.<sup>3</sup> Since Amitābha is the head of the family (*kula*) of Amitāyus, the overall background of the four walls was dedicated to a symbolic 1000-fold depiction of that directional Buddha. Unlike the larger images noted above, Amitābha is shown in *nirmāṇakāya* attire (i.e. in monk robe). An interesting feature, not observed anywhere else, concerns the colour, or rather colours, of the background. The walls were in effect horizontally structured into violet-burgundy, and blue stripes.



Fig. 11 — *Amoghasiddhi-Amitāyus with Bodhisattvas.* (Kozicz 2015)



Fig. 12 — *Eastern wall of the chamber.* (Bertsch 2012)

<sup>3</sup> See Lokesh Chandra 1999: 224.



Fig. 13 — Figures wearing local Tibetan dresses in the lower register of the eastern wall.  
(Kozicz 2015)

While the 1000-Amitābha motif represents a stereotypical pattern, the lowest horizontal register of the murals of the chamber depict groups of individual deities of different ranks within the Buddhist pantheon as well as figures whose representations obviously reflect a western Tibetan visual vocabulary. The register situated below Vairocana-Amitāyus centres on Tārā, Avalokiteśvara, and Paṃśābarī. Towards the corners, figures dressed in traditional western Himalayan clothes are shown. They wear heavy coats and thick hats. Some of them hold weapons (e.g. noose, spears) in their hands. One of them is riding a horse. The horse is not crouching but standing, which clearly indicates that it does not show a symbolic *vāhana* but an actual mount. These figures display striking stylistic similarities with the wall paintings from the assembly hall (*'du khang*) of Khojar Monastery in Purang which were discussed and published in detail by Heidi and Helmut Neumann in an article about the Bhaiṣajyaguru maṇḍala of that temple.<sup>4</sup> If compared with the depiction of the minister of the group of the Seven Jewels of the King of Kings (*cakravartin*) of that maṇḍala, it seems as if the two drawings were made in the same workshop; if not by same hand.<sup>5</sup> At Tashigang, their number amounts to six altogether, but their individual identification or even the exact nature of their social rank is impossible to determine at this stage of the study. In this regard, the adjoining southern register poses comparatively little challenges,

<sup>4</sup> See Neumann and Neumann 2010: 124-129.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem: 136, Figure 23.

as it is dedicated to the deities of the ten directions. At the centre, beneath Ratnasambhava-Amitāyus, Indra on his elephant and four-headed Brahma on a goose clearly highlight the iconographic topic of this wall. To Brahma's right, we find Varuṇa on the makara followed by Yama, Agni on a goat, and finally Nairṛti brandishing a corpse with his sword. To Indra's left, we see two figures on horses. The first one appears to be Pṛthivī, the only female deity within the set. Pṛthivī's *vāhana* is actually a boar, but in this picture she sits atop a horse or mule. The second deity on horseback should then be Kubera. Then follows Vāyu on an antelope or deer, and finally Iśāna holding a trident and riding a bull. An additional figure in wrathful posture was added to the group next to the corner. The western wall is comparatively difficult to decipher. This is mainly due to the degree of dilapidation as several of the deities are practically illegible. The central positions were once held by blue-coloured wrathful deities. Unfortunately, these are the ones most affected by decay. The best preserved figures are those near the corners. The clearest among those is the elephant-headed Gaṇapati close to the north-western corner. Finally, the panel of the Amoghasiddhi-Amitāyus wall was dedicated to a set of Kubera/Vaiśravaṇa with his entourage of yakṣa generals. Interestingly, Vaiśravaṇa is only surrounded by six of his generals instead of eight. This is particularly noteworthy as there would have been enough space for another general. Kubera/Vaiśravaṇa is shown in Indian attire and seated on his appropriate *vāhana*, the lion. The yakṣa generals too, were depicted wearing loin cloths and riding horses. The choice of the northern wall for the placement of this set is in accordance with the position of Kubera/Vaiśravaṇa within the Buddhist pantheon. He is both the guardian king of the North and the sovereign of the yakṣa. To briefly summarise, the two walls above the two original gates were dedicated to deities from the tantric section of the pantheon and to historical figures, while the 'lateral' registers focused on topics related to an earlier stratum of Buddhist ideology. It may also be noted that the sets of the 'lateral walls' (i.e. North and South), focus on the image situated in the middle (i.e. Vaiśravaṇa and Brahma), as all other figures are directed towards them. By contrast, the figures of the sets above the two gates (i.e. East and West) are all shown frontally.

Similarities in terms of style, composition and iconography sustain a dating of the monument to the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century.



Fig. 14 — *Southern wall with the deities of the ten directions.* (Kozicz 2015)



Fig. 15 — *Kubera on his lion and one of his yaksha generals.* (Kozicz 2015)

I would like to return again to the *Bhaiṣajyaguru maṇḍala* of Khojar. The two *maṇḍalas* not only share stylistic features and the depictions of the deities of the ten directions. At Khojar, the yakṣa generals too, are prominently included in the *maṇḍala*.<sup>6</sup> Both Amitāyus and Bhaiṣajyaguru are among the eminent deities whose cults were – and still are – related to the prolongation of the life span. Therefore, and in addition to stylistic evidence, the wider iconographic system applied at Tashigang provides a further hint

<sup>6</sup> For detailed descriptions of the directional deities and the yakṣa generals at Khojar; see Neumann and Neumann 2010: 128–135, Figures 8–22.

whereby the Amitāyus *maṇḍala* is linked to *maṇḍala* of the Medicine Buddha at Khojar.

While the positions of all the deities along the walls were well chosen, the orientation of the very central Amitāyus appears to be surprising at first sight. The *maṇḍala* is not placed in accordance with the main axis of the *stūpa*. Instead, the axis of the main figure points towards the corner between the southern and the western walls. Again, this was no deliberate choice or even incidental feature. Since the building was not exactly built according to the actual directions of the compass, but roughly facing south-east, the original passage was oriented south-east to north-east. Accordingly, the actual orientation of what is the internal south-west corner is in fact west. I conclude that the person in charge of the development of the overall program aimed at connecting the internal realm with both the actual topographic and directional context.

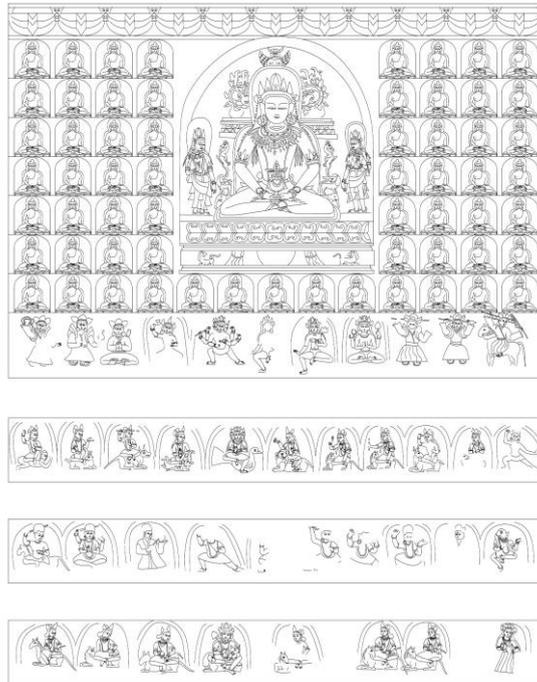


Fig. 16 — Drawing of the complete eastern wall plus the three lower registers of the other walls in clockwise order (S,W,N). (Drawing Kozicz)



Fig. 17 — Drawing of the ceiling *maṇḍala*. (Drawing Kozicz)

The *maṇḍala* was not only a subject related to the composition of the ceiling and the composition of the upper chamber. The compositional aspects of the *maṇḍala*, based on the division of a spatial plan into a regular grid, can also be traced in the floor plan. Taking into account the natural deviations from the exact plan, it becomes obvious from the geometric pattern of the plans of both levels that the whole *stūpa* was composed upon a grid of 6 × 6 fields. The upper chamber covers exactly the four central fields of the grid, while the sideward extensions of the lower chamber measure two fields each. The dimensions of the walls too, fit into this pattern. The building as a whole may therefore be understood as a *maṇḍala* originally dedicated to Amitāyus and the prolongation of life.

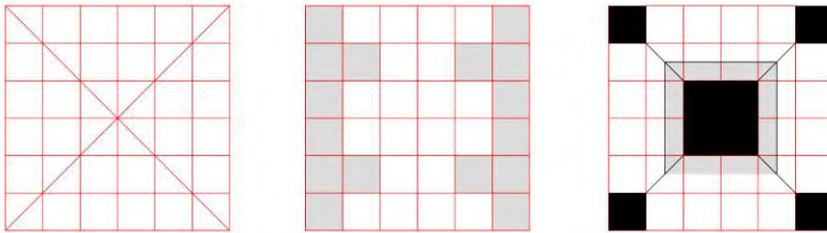


Fig. 18 — Floor plan and *maṇḍala* grid. (Drawing Kozicz)

The overall setting of the monuments of Tashigang is certainly dominated by the interaction between a set of three *lha thos* and the *Amitāyus stūpa*. The three colours of the *stūpa* are actually mirrored by the design of the *lha thos*.

Viewed from the village, which was of course the perspective intended by the builders, the three *lha thos* appear on the horizon. This significant choice underlines the function and the meaning of these structures as a *lha tho* is both a representation of the seat of a deity as well as a symbolic representation of the essence of the respective divinity.<sup>7</sup> The elongated form and placement of the *lha thos* highlight their anthropomorphic deification. The fact that three *lha thos* form a group not only enhances their visual impact. It is also very uncommon to find such sets in the Western Himalaya; apart from smaller specimens composed of stones just piled upon each other like pyramids, I have not come across a comparable set in Ladakh or Spiti. In addition, there are also other features not commonly found elsewhere and therefore unexpected. First of all, the horns of ibex and blue sheep usually placed on *lha thos* are not part of their compositions. Instead, another small altar-like *lha tho* was erected beneath the rock upon which the group was placed. A close inspection of the *lha thos* reveals further significant aspects. First, each of the *lha thos* has a small platform attached to its hill-facing side. Accordingly, the *lha thos* have a stream-lined shape. Second, two different kinds of branches were used for the upper 'decorative' part. Commonly, juniper has always been the first choice for that part of a *lha tho*. When juniper is not available, some local 'substitute' can be chosen. But in the present case, two different layers were carefully made using branches of trees locally known as 'tama' and 'perma'.

---

<sup>7</sup> The symbolic value of *lha thos* is highlighted by a number of monuments which display the faces of the enshrined guardian deities on their cubes. The most prominent example is probably the blue *lha tho* of the protector of the field at the entrance to the valley of Hemis Monastery in Ladakh.



Fig. 19 — Tashigang *lha tho* group plus additional *lha tho* altar. (Kozicz 2015)

Similar configurations of *lha tho*-like stele have been documented by Charles Ramble and Nils Gutschow in Mustang. There, they represent the *rigs gsum mgon po*, the Three Protectors of the Faith; namely Mañjuśrī, Avalokiteśvara, and Vajrapāṇi. Built as *stūpas* their architectural manifestations are among the most popular architectural topic across the Buddhist Himalayas.<sup>8</sup> However, their order and the respective colour scheme follow a strict pattern which places white Avalokiteśvara in the centre and red, or sometimes orange, Mañjuśrī to his right. This is not the case at Tashigang where the colour scheme is White-Red-Blue. Again, this was not the result of a misinterpretation of the general rule but a deliberate choice as this set does not relate to the Three Protectors of the Faith at all. Instead, interviews with local residents and lamas native to the site produced a different, albeit not homogenous picture of the *lha thos* and their background. According to interviews taken among members of the family of the astrologer (*dbon po*) of Tashigang in November 2015, the set represents the Three Protectors of the Gelugpa, the yellow sect. The deities enshrined should be the red Hayagrīva in the centre flanked by white Nezer Gyalpo (*nezer rgyal po*) to his right and blue Palden Lhamo (*dpal ldan lha mo*) to his left.

<sup>8</sup> The stele form type of *rigs gsum mgon po* documented by Gutschow and Ramble (2003: 162–165) naturally lack the horns and *kha btags*, too, since edifices dedicated to the Buddhist *rigs gsum mgon po* are essentially not *lha tho*.

Hayagrīva is one of the earliest tutelary deities of Buddhism whose original pre-Tantric form is that of a yakṣa.<sup>9</sup> Nezer Gyalpo is not that old but his service to the Gelugpa is well ascertained as a group of seven *lha thos* dedicated to him was installed around Leh in the Indus Valley.<sup>10</sup> These seven *lha thos*—also referred to as seven brothers (*spun*)—create a sort of protective network for the Gelugpa foundations of that area as they ‘cover’ a significant stretch of the valley from Parka to Arzu and Gompa (north of Leh). Palden Lhamo is best known as the tutelary deity of Tibet and the Dalai Lamas. There is another single *lha tho* dedicated to her next to the main road between Lossar and Hansa in the very upper Spiti Valley. The visual significance of that *lha tho* is the dominance of blue textiles while the colour red is not represented. This *lha tho* is considered as one of the most powerful in the valley. It is among the few *lha thos* where not only the annual *pūjā* related to the renewal at New Year is performed. Locals offer barley beer (*chang*) and recite prayers to Palden Lhamo whenever they pass by.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> For the history of Hayagrīva see Rob Linrothe’s discussion in *Ruthless Compassion* (1999: 95–140).

<sup>10</sup> A similar set of seven *lha thos* centring on the Sakya Monastery of Matho in Ladakh is discussed by Pascal Dollfus in her article on the seven Rongtsen *lha thos* of Ladakh (2006: 373–406). The major difference between the Rongtsen (*srong btsan*) *lha thos* and the Nezer Gyalpo *lha thos* is that there are actually seven Rongtsen Brothers associated with that set while in the case of the Nezer Gyalpo *lha thos* one entity is considered as moving freely between the single monuments that constitute the group.

<sup>11</sup> According to local informants interviewed in October 2015, the current Dalai Lama visited this *lha tho* and performed a *pūjā* on the occasion of a Kālacakra Ceremony held at Ki. It was not specified by the informants whether this *pūjā* took place during the Kālacakra ceremony 1983 or 1996, or at both events.



*Fig. 20 — Nezer Gyalpo, Parka village temple. (Kozicz 2014)*



*Fig. 21 — Palden Lhamo lha tho near Lossar.*



Fig. 22 — The Three Protectors of the Gelugpa watching over Tashigang.

Another interview conducted by Yannick Laurent at Tashigang in summer 2016, brought to light a completely different story.<sup>12</sup> According to information received from Grags pa bsam gtan, a Gelugpa monk and native of the village, the main territorial deity of Tashigang is Pehar (*rgyal po dpe har*). In the interview he was referred to as Pehkar Gyalpo (*pde kar/dkar rgyal po*). Pehar's *lha tho* seems to be situated on a mountain behind the village nearby the pass. By contrast to the previously collected notes, the three cairns on the ridge are affiliated with the tripartite conception of the world found in Tibet and in the Himalayas. White is representative of the royal (*rgyal po*) and divine plane, the red colour stands for the mountain warrior spirits (*brtsan*), and blue refers to the subterranean spirits (*klu*).

These two versions do not necessarily pose a contradiction as such. It is a widely acknowledged phenomenon that in the Himalayan and Tibetan cultural sphere the same object might have completely different meanings and function depending on the affiliation and ideological background of the respective practitioner. Especially among the countless territorial deities this is not an

---

<sup>12</sup> This interview was brought to my attention at a very late point during the process of adaption of the text to the editorial comments in June 2017 and it was not possible to conduct another field trip prior to the completion of the essay in order to re-evaluate and clarify the two different versions.

unexpected feature. The perhaps most significant example for such switch of background or double interpretation is the case of Tsi'u Marpo, the protector of Samye Monastery in Central Tibet. His body colour is red and his three characteristic iconographic elements are the hat with three flags, a heart in his left hand and the spear in his right hand to pierce down a demon. At the same time, this is also the exact visual form of Jagpa Melen, the protector of Thimphu Valley in Bhutan. Accordingly, a Drukpa follower would understand a depiction of this deity completely different to a Nyingmapa practitioner.

We actually do not have any clue about the actual age of the three *lha thos* of Tashigang Village. The significant three-colour-pattern would certainly point at some connection to the gateway *stūpa* and favour some hypothesis on a Sakyapa context, but the oral tradition referring to the tripartite model of the cosmos may certainly be understood as hint to a tradition rooted in a pre-Buddhist cultural stratum. I assume the *lha thos* have accumulated several layers of meaning over the centuries and that the Gelugpa finally superimposed their protective triad over an earlier tradition without erasing it completely—perhaps not even attempting to erase it.

The *stūpa* was probably a part of the religious landscape created by the Sakya order before it was taken over by the Gelugpa after they established their regional centre at Ki.<sup>13</sup> With the incorporation of the *lha thos* into their ideological system by positioning their own protective triad, the Gelugpa nevertheless made a clear statement. Through their protectors they proclaimed superiority over the site and made it clearly visible across the gorge. Through a deliberate choice of colours, they also incorporated the existing *stūpa* into their system and brought it under their sovereignty. In a similar manner, the incorporation of the *lha thos* may therefore not be understood as a measure only to guard or protect a certain territory but also as a method to exercise control and power over the territory.

### *Acknowledgements*

My participation in the Oxford Conference as well as the fieldtrips

---

<sup>13</sup> The Sakya monastery of sTeng rgyud at Gog mig is considered the only Sakya complex in the Spiti Valley. dKyid monastery is traditionally attributed to the Gelugpa monks sTod Shes rab bzang po and his disciple Shes rab blo gros (Vitali 2000 : 82-84).

(July 2012, July 2014 and November 2015) and the production of this article were made possible through generous funding by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) Projects P21336–G21, P25475–G21 and P28509–G26. First of all, I would also like to express my gratitude to Elmar Bertsch for sharing his photographic documentation and Marina Đurovka for technical support and photo editing. I deeply thank Azade Toygar and Dania Huber for their comments and corrections. Finally, my sincere gratitude is to be expressed to the editors of the present volume, Yannick Laurent and David Pritzker, for their highly professional editorial work, their patience, and their dedication to the Himalayan research which made all this possible. I would also like to thank Yannick Laurent for sharing his new results on the *lha thos*. For all mistakes that might still have remained undetected I fully take responsibility.

### Bibliography

Devers, Q., L. Bruneau and M. Vernier 2014. "An archaeological account of ten ancient painted chortens in Ladakh and Zanskar", In *Art and Architecture in Ladakh: Cross-cultural Transmissions in the Himalayas and Karakoram*, edited by E.F. Lo Bue and J. Bray. Leiden, Boston: Brill, pp. 100–140.

Dollfus, P. 2006. *The seven Rongtsan brothers in Ladakh: myth, territory and possession*. EMSCAT 36–37, 373–406.

Gutschow, N. and C. Ramble 2003. "Up and down, inside and outside: notions of space and territory in Tibetan villages of Mustang", in *Sacred Landscape of the Himalaya. Proceedings of an International Conference at Heidelberg, 25–27 May 1998*, edited by N. Gutschow, A. Michaels, C. Ramble and E. Steinkellner. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, pp. 137–176.

Howard, K. 1995. "Archaeological notes on mChod rten types in Ladakh and Zanskar from the 11th–15th centuries", in *Recent Research on Ladakh 4 and 5. Proceedings of the Fourth and Fifth International Colloquia on Ladakh*, edited by H. Osmaston and P. Denwood (eds). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, pp. 61–78.

Linrothe, R. 1999. *Ruthless Compassion: Wrathful Deities in Early Indo-Tibetan Esoteric Buddhist Art*. London: Serindia Publications.

Lokesh, Chandra 1999. *Dictionary of Buddhist Iconography: Volume 1*. Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture.

Luczanits, C. 1998. "On an unusual painting style in Ladakh", in *The Inner Asian International Style 12th–14th Centuries. Papers Presented at a Panel of the 7th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Graz 1995*, edited by D.E. Klimburg-Salter and E. Allinger. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, pp. 151–169.

Neumann, H.F. and H.A. Neumann 2010. "An early wall painting of a Bhaiṣajyaguru mandala in Western Tibet", in *Tibetan Art and Architecture in Context. PIATS 2006: Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the Eleventh Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies. Königswinter 2006*, edited by E. Lo Bue and C. Luczanits. Andiastr: IITBS, International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, pp. 121–142.

Vitali, R. 2000. "A Short Guide to Key Gonpa Entitled The Mirror That Sheds Light on the Centre of the Mandala", in *sPyi ti dkyil dgon nor bu dge 'phel gyi byung ba brjod pa'i rab byed phags nor bdun ldan : A Short Guide to Key Gonpa*, pp. 77-83.

